



His male lyricist partner having quit, Eddie ponders what to do. Friend Dixie, a waitress with a Southern drawl, delicately asks if he could work with a woman, when he assents, she cautiously presents her lyrics for the tune. Women's labor involves managing emotions as well as creative industrial writing.



Months later, successful and married, Eddie is sucked into a Park Avenue lifestyle. His vanity makes him unproductive for the music business.

## Lady Be Good

by Chuck Kleinhans

*Lady Be Good*, a fairly conventional 1941 MGM musical, provides good opportunities for analyzing ideology in an entertainment comedy. By reprinting the articles here, we can highlight some basic ideas, strengths, and strategies of ideological analysis. The film's simple story line presents a comedy of remarriage between a successful composer and lyricist who discover separation is unsatisfying and who then get together by collaborating on the title song (which was already a well known standard in the American Songbook). The song's hit status bonds the pair: Ann Sothorn and Robert Taylor. Promotion headlined Eleanor Powell, an athletic tap dancer, and novelty dance sequences went to tap trio The Berry Brothers.

Originally MGM assigned the direction to Busby Berkeley, but then reassigned it to Norman Z. McLeod. Berkeley choreographed the final spectacular production number, "Fascinatin' Rhythm," using Powell and 100 men in top hat and canes.

Jane Gaines considers *Lady Be Good* in terms of the 1970s and 1980s emerging semiotic analysis, working from Umberto Eco's pioneering work. A more sociologically grounded analysis than more formalist and linguistic work in film semiotics, Eco's terms expand the field of examination. Gaines begins with a novelty dance number by Powell and a fox terrier that ends with a perhaps naughty zoophilic embrace. She extends the discussion to multiple complexities of close reading within a semiotic frame. Thus Gaines is able to show how "rhythm" contained in music, the sound track, dance and movement, comes to be linked to "success."

Scott Brewer and I provide a detailed breakdown of a long montage sequence demonstrating the remarkable formal complexity of the montage process as well as the underlying implicit assumptions. Because "success" is such a fundamental part of U.S. cultural expression, I further break down the ideological implications of the montage sequence revealing that while it presents itself as innocent and transparent, in fact the historical context reveals a tendentious and mercenary intent to the entertainment.

These three articles on the film were first published in *Jump Cut's* 1986 print version, but the subsequent online version published later did not include the frame grabs. Here we republish the essays with the original images (now augmented with some additional frames and in a few cases corrected—a few had been flipped). Earlier versions were presented at the annual Society for Cinema Studies conference in 1979, based on a graduate class in film theory I taught at Northwestern University in 1978. As such the articles fit in with a then newly developing understanding of entertainment films and particularly of the musical, exemplified by the work of Richard Dyer, Jane Feuer, and Rick Altman.



At a posh nightclub, with Eddie and Dixie present, the Berry Brothers, a gymnastic tap trio, perform the couple's first hit song.



The actual labor of song writing is presented as acts of almost spontaneous creation in which work is just creative fun.



As they work through the first draft of "Lady Be Good," the pair exude casual ease.



## *Lady Be Good* — ideology in the success sequence

by Chuck Kleinhans

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"A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."

— Karl Marx, *Capital*

The success sequence in *Lady Be Good* shows the song "Lady Be Good" from its creation to its becoming the nation's top song hit. At first glance, the process appears quite simple and straightforward. A song is produced in artistic collaboration, published as sheet music and performed live by various talents. As popularity grows, records are made which stimulate further performances. Finally, radio follows popular opinion and validates the song as number one on the *Hit Parade*. The process presented is extremely ideological: in a general sense operating within the arena of bourgeois ideology, and in a specific sense promoting one particular set of explanations of capitalist mass culture activity. I want to develop a Marxist analysis of this phenomenon by examining three areas: the situation of the music industry in 1941, the nature and function of the hit parade, and the concept of success.



At the ASCAP banquet, Max their song publisher announces that their (commercial) success must be honored with this ceremony.



Since *Lady Be Good* is set partially within the music industry in 1941 (figuratively in the film's narrative and literally in that both the film and music businesses often overlap within the culture industry), let's consider the historical situation of popular music at the time. An investigation reveals that the actual conditions of music production were different from what the film shows. In the late 30s, the older pattern of Tin Pan Alley songwriting and publication, which focused on sheet music sales and live performance and embodied here in Dixie and Eddie, was forced to change in response to the growth of newer capitalist media such as records and broadcast radio. With the advent of sound film, another factor was introduced that changed the situation further.

"Hit hard, first by records then by radio, Tin Pan Alley was tottering. Hollywood now stepped in and took over many publishers. Warner had the cream. Their Music Publisher's Holding Corporation held the copyrights to most of the songs of Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Noel Coward, George Gershwin, Sigmund Romberg, and Rodgers and Hart. As a result, Warner Bros. controlled a majority of ASCAP's governing board. Together with the publishing companies of the other major studios Hollywood owned the bulk of America's — the world's — popular music. Thus, when radio defied ASCAP In 1939, it was really defying Hollywood." [1] [[open notes in new window](#)]

In 1939 the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) formed Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) to challenge ASCAP, which was essentially a monopoly guild of songwriters and publishers. The showdown came when ASCAP announced its 1941 rates for radio broadcast — up 100%. Radio refused to pay the increase, and for ten months no ASCAP songs were played on U.S. radio. Instead the broadcast industry used out-of-copyright works such as those by Stephen Foster and by the newer (and formerly regional) talents of Black and country and western songwriters, now enrolled in BMI. After about ten months ASCAP settled with radio, on radio's terms.

With this brief sketch as background, some facts about *Lady Be Good* become quite interesting. The film's producer, Arthur Freed, was a top ASCAP money maker at the time. He came west from New York with the introduction of sound, wrote numerous songs for MGM musicals in the thirties, and had considerable revenue from the subsequent sheet music sales and performance licensing of his movie hits. An ASCAP activist, he was honored with a banquet by the organization in the late 30s and participated in ASCAP concerts in 1940, which were intended to build public sentiment for ASCAP in the upcoming battle with the NAB and BMI. At about the same time, Freed bought *Lady, Be Good* from Warner's for \$61,500. (It had been a 1924 Gershwin Broadway musical with Fred and Adele Astaire. Freed kept the title, the title song, and "Fascinatin' Rhythm," and discarded the original book.) Production began February 24, 1941, and Norman McLeod brought the film in on time April 13, though Busby Berkeley's dance sequences were not completed until early May. The film was released September 12. In other words, the film was shot and released during radio's fight with ASCAP and (indirectly) Hollywood.

What are we to make of this information? I believe that if we have it in mind when looking at the success sequence, we can see that the film chooses a very particular side, the ASCAP side, in a fight between different groups of capitalists. In large part, the sequence is organized as and functions as fairly direct propaganda. At the same time, I must admit that I'm a little uneasy about having discovered this clear connection between a specific economic struggle within capitalism and a sequence in a Hollywood entertainment film. Isn't this getting close to the kind of Vulgar Marxist interpretation that all Marxist critics are supposed to scorn, ridicule, and denounce whenever possible?



Delivering the only overt political message of the film, Dixie sings a new song at the banquet, "The Last Time I Saw Paris," with the superimposition of her singing face over stock shots of the French capital. At the time of the film's release in September 1941, German troops had been occupying the city for over a year. Thus the melancholy song about remembering Paris was understood as referring to the city before the wartime invasion. Thus it was a subtle anti-fascist statement at a time when the US was still neutral regarding the war in Europe.

But we must remember that however much we might want to avoid conspiracy theories of ideology in mass culture, in point of fact, there are times when capitalists use the mass media to directly promote their immediate interests. Hollywood's contemporaneous take on World War II provides one example. To stress the relative autonomy of the cultural superstructure still leaves the analyst with responsibility for considering the actual relations.

By considering a different aspect of the success sequence, I may be able to make my analysis more sophisticated. Specifically, the sequence's use of Variety's best selling songs and the *Hit Parade* radio program is interesting in light of work done on the Top Ten by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre's interest in examining the Top Ten song hits in the book is part of his analysis of ideology and social organization in contemporary capitalist society. He develops a special vocabulary and set of philosophic concepts; I will somewhat simplify his argument.

Sartre begins by explaining that the *Hit Parade* program in the postwar period had the effect of increasing sales 30% to 50%. A song that made the top ten greatly boosted its sales after being heard on the Saturday night program. In effect, this phenomenon perpetuates the previous week's selections and defines future action for the consumer. If you buy a top ten record after hearing the *Hit Parade*, it is because it has been singled out by an Other. Of course in terms of individual purchasers, people do like what they buy. But to actually prefer the record bought, one would first have to have heard all the other new records.

What we have then is the action of a small group (previous buyers of the record, last week's consumers) extended in time and distance and influencing the present. The propagation of the top selling record list allows individuals to become aware of what they have done as individuals in terms of economic exchange, and also it allows them to become aware of their existence within a pattern of exchange in general. A certain abstraction takes place. The name of the song is connected with its individual quality and this in turn connected with the performers. Thus one hears and buy the "new Stones" or the "new Madonna." Figures for previous sales are transformed into value rankings — quantity becomes quality. A hierarchy of

values builds, based on quantitative relations between sales figures, and objective (mathematical) ranking becomes a unified system of values. Everyone then sees the system of values as the expression of collective choice.

This is, Sartre points out, a fine example of alienation appearing as freedom. By purchasing the Top Ten, you do not end up with your own preferred music, with a collection that is based on personal aesthetic judgment, but rather you end up with the record collection of no one, the records of the Other. (An experience I'm sure we've all had when we eagerly bought a hot new record and later found we never played it after an initial listening trial.)

We see this process at work in the success sequence, or perhaps I should say we can see this process if we choose to understand the sequence in terms external to the sequence itself. Most obviously this reading is reinforced if we connect the rise of the song "Lady Be Good" with the success of Eddie and Dixie. The thinly-disguised ASCAP banquet that concludes the sequence provides the honor, recognition and acclaim that seems to belong "naturally" with the song's becoming number one in the country. Indeed, in the banquet scene Max says that the immense popular success (i.e., sales) demands that ASCAP honor its creators. Commercial success breeds personal success — a basic element of bourgeois ideology. Thus the film presents, re-presents, the dominant ideology on the level of dramatic narrative, on the level of montage technique, and on the level of explicit character speech.

If we look at success as a general concept developed, elaborated, and made concrete in the success sequence, we find that it can be readily understood. Success joins two things: money and public acclaim. This much is very clear in the sequence. But what is not made clear is how this success can be achieved; the mechanism of success remains a mystery in the film. The film does not show how the system of hit songs operates; it does not produce accurate knowledge about the mass culture industry. But asking for that kind of information and analysis means asking for a radical film, for a Marxist film. One of the most obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the success sequence, and from the film as a whole, is that success is not the result of the rationality, planning, understanding and calculated action usually associated with commercial enterprise. Rather, success is always linked to spontaneity, to accident, to luck. It just happens and no one knows why. Some songs are hits and others aren't. In short, the pop music system operates spontaneously, magically, and mysteriously. In this way too, the film is ideological, conforming to an imaginary concept of capitalism.

*Lady Be Good* rests within the hegemony of bourgeois ideology in many ways. But to get beyond an ideological understanding of success, of the hit parade, or of *Lady Be Good* as an example of mass culture, we must go beyond the film itself. We must understand it existing within history, within society, and within ideology. As Marx argued, a commodity is a mysterious thing. A mass culture commodity, a specific film, can seem especially so, but it is possible to solve the mystery.

## Notes

1. Ian Whitcomb, *After the Ball: Pop Music from Rag to Rock* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 119. [[return to text](#)]





# Lady Be Good — montage in the success sequence

by D. Scott Brewer and Chuck Kleinhans

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The rapid montage sequence depicting and condensing a process of increasing success appears repeatedly in classical Hollywood films. As a recurrent element, it emerges frequently in biography pictures as a transitional device between early years of strife, hardship and preparation, and later years of a fully blossomed achievement. In such sequences we often see the meteoric rise of the athlete, gangster or entertainer moving from apprenticeship to national prominence, from family to the big time. Success montages often appear as elliptical condensations of group projects too. Thus the backstage musical commonly uses one type of success montage in depicting a condensed version of the opening night show and the audience's enthusiastic response.

Because it is such a widely used element of cinema, we were interested in closely examining a particular example — the composition of and rise to the top of the hit parade of the title song in the MGM musical *Lady Be Good* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1941). This sequence offers considerable development, and its length of about five and one-half minutes makes it one of the longest and most substantial success montages that we've seen.

We began studying the sequence on a horizontal editing table, which allowed us to observe the exact construction of the sequence. Some people might raise questions about this method of analysis, pointing out that by being able to examine the sequence frame by frame, we have analyzed it in a totally different way than how it is actually perceived by audiences. True enough. We acknowledge the difference between an analytical reading and an experiential one. But we also want to argue that we are able to describe the film in a way that opens up a more accurate understanding of how the film presents material which is perceived and understood almost instantaneously. In addition, we are able to consider how the sequence was put together, and how the makers of *Lady Be Good* tried to present the intellectual idea of "success" and the abstract concept of mass culture popularity in the concrete form of a rapid succession of images and sounds. We want to present here some results of our more detailed analysis. We do not claim to be exhaustive, but we do feel we have observed the most significant elements of the sequence in terms of what is conveyed and how it is presented.

The sequence can be loosely described in six parts, each of which shows one stage in the progress of song and songwriters: from creation to mass reproduction (printing), sheet music sales, song plugging, record sales, mass popularity, and triumphant success. A complete formal breakdown of the montage revealing all sound and image relations would be very long because of the density of the passage. Here we are presenting the results of our more detailed analysis in a digested format. We have segmented the sequence by major actions that convey a single concept or a related cluster of concepts.

To set the scene: Composer Eddie Crane (Robert Young) and lyricist Dixie Donegan

(Ann Sothern) have gradually become a successful popular songwriting team and also a married couple. They split up professionally and personally, but neither is successful or happy without the partnership. At the point the success sequence appears, about two-thirds of the way into the film, Eddie tries to make up with Dixie. He tries out a new tune on her and she begins to supply lyrics. Thus the song "Lady Be Good" is born. (We will not deal here with the "artistic creation" sequences in *Lady Be Good*. Suffice it to say this is the third time in the film Dixie and Eddie "spontaneously" compose together.)

We are starting the success sequence with Eddie's playing of the completed song. Throughout the next five minutes and 21 seconds the song continues, changing in arrangement, tempo, orchestration and vocals. It ends with Eddie and Dixie at a banquet in their honor given by other songwriters and music publishers. In addition to showing their success via "Lady Be Good," the sequence reestablishes their working relationship and brings their personal lives together.

Presentation of images moves from *Connotation* (in italics) to shot number to time segment within the montage (shot number: minute.second) to image content summarized.

## Part one: from creation to mass reproduction

*Connotations of working (artist and technician).*



1: 0.00 Eddie starts playing the completed song; he hesitates at "misunderstood." They look at each other. Their separation has been a "misunderstanding." The glance unites them professionally and personally.



2: 0.22 In their publisher's office with Max (publisher) and Red (song plugger). Everyone beams. Max reaches for his cigar several times but is taken up with the music and stops the gesture. The song overwhelms automatic behavior; enchantment



3: 0.38 Shifting glances; all look at Max who says, "We've got a hit on our hands." Handshakes. People in the music business "know" the commercial future of a song on hearing it. Once created the hit is recognized for what it is, not made into a hit.





4: 0.46 Max: "Get me an arranger." Music: violins connote speed, acceleration. A symbolic moment; next we see a door with the word "arranger" on it. The montage builds on generalization not specificity.

5: 0.49 Door: "Arranger." Iris out: hands on piano.

6: 0.54 Eddie and older man; smoking, shirtsleeves, trying major chord then minor chord then major chord.

Connotations of work.



7: 1.00 CU of handwritten song and hands; erasures, changes.

8: 1.07 Superimposition from 1.03 to 1.11; printing press, (stock footage) pulling a proof copy, correcting a proof copy by hand, a large press.

The sequence moves from *creation to mass reproduction*. Sheet music is the initial and basic form a hit takes.



9 1.12 (left) Superimposition: printing press and "Lady Be Good" sheet music stacking up (pixillation).

Part two: sheet music sales

In many ways the next segment *conveys spontaneity as the sheet music increases in sales*. The segment details sheet music sales, building in a pattern of threes (two could be coincidence; three establishes a pattern). We see a piano playing "Lady Be Good" in a retail store, then "sales," and then a display case and money.

Declared a hit before public acceptance (self-fulfilling prophecy).

10: 1.15 (left) CU sheet music cover and "New Hit" sign.



*Connotations of eagerness.*



11: 1.19 (left) Retail store. Matronly pianist playing stride piano style. Background: young people buying sheet music.

A number of changes take place when we see other retail stores: the pianist becomes *more fashionable, the buyers older and more numerous (younger people are tastemakers, trendsetters), more sales people appear.*

*"Serious" music instruments are the background for sheet music passing from retail clerk to consumers.*



12: 1.22 (left) Display case with violin, horn, flute. Sheet music passed across counter, waiting hands. No money is exchanged.

*The fact of increased sales is shown. Why and how this happened is not shown.*



13: 1.25 Another store with a "Lady Be Good" wall display in the back, pianist, more people, more women customers, two women selling.



14: 1.31 Sheet music on display case without explanation disappears off the case. Superimposition of coins falling downward in the frame.



15: 1.32 Sheet music all disappears. Coins fall in superimposition and pile up in the same plane as the top of the display case.

*The process of exchange, the circulation of commodities, is shown by the juxtaposition of two things: sheet music disappears and coins begin piling up. Although actual exchange of goods and money is not shown, retail trade is not accurately depicted, some kind of a relation is established. Sheet music goes to "the public" (not really customers or consumers in the economic sense), and money*



arrives and increases.

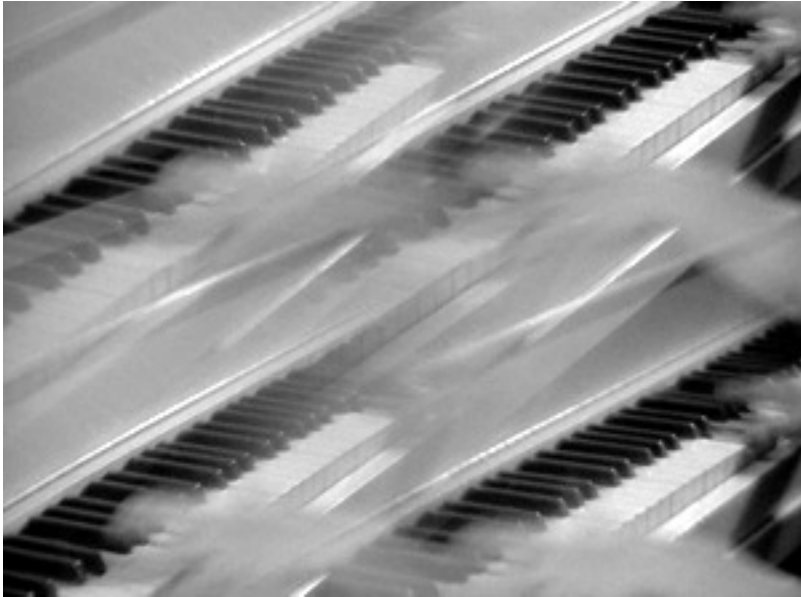
*Increase in numbers implies success. The success of the song links Eddie and Dixie in love and as public figures, celebrities.*



16: 1.35 Third store. Two pianists, customers crowding the counter, in the background a display with Eddie and Dixie's picture in a heart and the words "Big Hit."



17: 1.38 Repetition of segment 14. Sheet music vanishes while money descends.



18: 1.43 Optical multiplication of hands playing piano; tempo of music increases.

*The sheet music echoes the coins falling earlier, to some extent equating the two.*



19: 1.50 (left) Exterior, store display window with crowd looking in. "Sensational Hit." Pages of sheet music fall downward in the frame in superimposition. At first we thought paper money was falling in superimposition, but it was sheet music.

*Sheet music sales appear to be a spontaneous activity — self generated and self propelled. Any rationality, order, decision making, planning, etc. in business is erased. The concept of "retail sales" disappears too. Instead, merchandise vanishes and money appears.*



20: 1.54 (left) Repetition of display case and disappearing sheet music with superimposition of a curtain of sheet music covers which rises. The segment depicting sheet music sales ends by continuing the "magical disappearance of sheet music.

### Part three: song plugging

*The job often had associations of crassness, aggressive selling, and sometimes "deals," favors, payola, etc.*

The next segment uses a pattern of three to show song plugging. The job of the song plugger was to persuade performers to use new songs. Such performance stimulated

sheet music sales. At the time, the song plugger was important in producing an initial momentum for the "hit."

*Aggressive selling vs. indifference or disinterest.*



21: 1.55 (left) Red (Red Skelton) the song plugger in the offices of a distinguished older man makes extreme gestures of playing a violin while making nasal "violin" sound.

*"LBG" reaches the audience for Boston Pops type performance.*



22: 2.01 (left) Man is shown as a conductor of an orchestra playing "Lady Be Good."

*A simple transition device that reinforces the idea of performance affecting sheet music sales.*



23: 2.07 (left) Curtain of sheet music moves up; copies of LBG sheet music fall down through the frame.

*Commonplace racist stereotyping: the musicians seem unimpressed.*



24: 2.09 (left) Red in a Chinese restaurant or club sings the song to some men in a mixture of pidgin English and "mispronounced" sing-song rhythm (with exaggerated gestures).

*A gag, but is the joke on them or on Red?*

25 2.14 (left) Same men in costume and with instruments. Singer sings in a foreign



(and us?)



language — no apparent relation to the English version in music or vocals.

*Sales are connoted.*



26 2.20 (left) Repeat of the sheet music curtain motif.

*The strong implication that the particularly open mercenary activity of song plugging has no effect. A hit is not really sold, it is recognized.*



27: 2.24 Red doing a pigeon-toed dance for the Berry Brothers (a stage dance trio who appeared earlier in the film) We are backstage with the Berry Brothers on and around large trunks and a Venus de Milo (*connotation — odd prop?*) As with the others Red songplugs, they seem disinterested. But in each case the song is used in performance.

28: 2.33 Red falls (*ineptness*).



*The headline is inordinately large, which makes it easy to read, but which also grants the song a great importance. The song is now known by one word — Lady — which is the mark of success and fame (e.g., Ike, Prince, Barbra, Ali, etc.)*



30: 2.41 (left) Transition. Sheet music covers superimposed with *Variety*.

31: 2.42 *Variety* headline: "Lady" Promising.

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